The Washington Post
Democracy Dies in Darkness

Democrats press for assault weapons ban, other gun laws after new mass shootings

Back-to-back tragedies have prompted a reexamination of existing local laws and whether national measures would help

By Amy B Wang

November 27, 2022 at 6:03 p.m. EST

Colo. Gov. Jared Polis (D) discussed the Club Q shooting and Rep. Brian Fitzpatrick (R-Pa.) discussed assault rifle bans in the wake of another mass shooting. (Video: The Washington Post)

Democrats are renewing their calls for a ban on assault weapons after the latest spate of multiple high-profile mass shootings, warning that their window to enact legislation is closing soon with Republicans set to take a narrow majority in the House in January.

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On Nov. 19, a shooter carrying a handgun and an AR-15-style rifle opened fire inside Club Q, an LGBTQ club in Colorado Springs, killing five people and injuring at least 18 others. Days later, a supervisor at a Walmart in Chesapeake, Va., killed six employees in a break room in the store with a handgun he had allegedly bought earlier that day, before apparently killing himself.

Other recent horrors — such as the shooting deaths of 19 students and two teachers in Uvalde, Tex., who were killed by a gunman who bought weapons and hundreds of rounds of ammunition just days after his 18th birthday — have also prompted a reexamination of the ease of obtaining assault weapons.

President Biden, who has long called for a ban on assault weapons and high-capacity magazines, vowed last week to double down on his efforts, including during the lame-duck session of Congress.

“The idea we still allow semiautomatic weapons to be purchased is sick. Just sick,” Biden told reporters on Thanksgiving. “It has no, no social redeeming value. Zero. None. Not a single solitary rationale for it except profit for the gun manufacturers.”

On Sunday, Sen. Chris Murphy (D-Conn.) said that he didn't think that Democrats have 60 votes in the Senate to overcome a filibuster and push through legislation to renew a ban on assault weapons, which the House passed in July. But he said he was glad that Biden was pushing them to take a vote.

“Does it have 60 votes in the Senate right now? Probably not. But let's see if we can try to get that number as close to 60 as possible,” Murphy said on CNN's “State of the Union.”

Democratic lawmakers called for more legislation to combat gun violence following mass killings in Colorado and Virginia. (Video: JM Rieger/The Washington Post)

Colorado's red-flag law — which allows authorities to remove guns from a person deemed potentially dangerous — has been under scrutiny since the shooting at Club Q, with questions about whether the law was properly implemented. Murphy blamed failures on the authorities of the county in which the Club Q shooting happened, and warned that lawmakers should explore withholding federal funds from law enforcement agencies that refuse to implement gun laws.

Colorado Gov. Jared Polis (D) said Sunday that officials would “take a hard look” at why the red-flag law wasn't used in this case, amid reports the suspect made a bomb threat against a family member last year.

“This is an example of a case where it might have been used,” Polis said on CBS's “Face the Nation.” “It wasn't pursued in this instance by the mother. You can also have a local sheriff agency do it. In this case, it wasn't pursued by the local sheriff agency. I'm sure what will be looked into is why wasn't it pursued.”

[What are red-flag laws?]

Polis said Colorado also needed to publicize the law better and explore expanding those who could seek an extreme risk protection order. However, he pointed out that some of the states bordering Colorado don't even have background checks, which would allow someone convicted of a felony in Colorado to simply drive an hour to buy weapons and return to the state. He encouraged federal lawmakers to look at instituting additional licenses or background checks for some of the most high-powered weapons.

“The answer needs to be national as well,” Polis said on NBC's “Meet the Press.” “I think what you really need to do if you're serious about reducing these kinds of gun violence events and mass violence events is try to take the best ideas from all sides that work.”

Murphy emphasized that the bill sitting in front of the Senate would stop only new sales, not take away weapons from individuals who already own them.

“But if you look at some of the most high-profile mass shootings in the last couple of years, many of those mass shooters bought the weapon just days before carrying out the crime,” he said.

Any new gun control restrictions will face an uphill battle after Republicans regain control of the House in about five weeks. On Sunday, Rep. James Comer (R-Ky.) waved off the usefulness of new gun-related bills in the wake of the shootings in Virginia and Colorado.

“I mean, we already have many gun laws on the books. If passing a bill would simply end gun violence, then I think you would have overwhelming support in Congress for that,” Comer said on “Meet the Press.”

Richard Fierro disarmed the Club Q shooter in Colorado Springs, Colo. Being portrayed as a hero, he said: “there are heroes every day.” (Video: Zoeann Murphy, James Cornsilk/The Washington Post)

Rep. Brian Fitzpatrick (R-Pa.), who was one of only two House Republicans to vote in support of the assault weapons ban in July, said other GOP members might support red-flag laws, depending on how they are written.

“There are ways you can write it where it preserves due process, protects law-abiding gun owners' rights, but at the same time advances community safety,” Fitzpatrick said on “Fox News Sunday.” “It's incumbent upon us to analyze the situation. Where were the gaps? Was the gap in the mental health system? Was it a HIPPA reporting issue? Was it a loophole in the background checks or is it something different?”

Murphy defended the passage of red-flag laws, even though they didn't prevent the recent shootings in Virginia and Colorado, saying it can take time “for these big, complicated laws to be put in**to** place.”

He praised Biden for signing into law this summer the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, the first gun-control legislation in 30 years, which sought to expand federal funding for state “crisis intervention programs,” including red-flag laws.

[Shooting suspect's troubled past was obscured by a name change, records show]

Murphy also issued a somber warning with the approach of the 10th anniversary next month of the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School, where 20 children and six adults were killed.

“I think you have to understand that communities that go through a mass shooting like this — Sandy Hook, Uvalde, now Colorado Springs — they're never the same,” he said. “Yes, it brings some measure of peace that we have passed legislation now that will at least provide a little bit of downward pressure on the number of shootings in this country.”

He also noted how every holiday serves as a sad reminder to such families of an epidemic unique to the United States.

“This is a choice to allow this to continue to happen,” he said.

Maxine Joselow and Ruby Cramer contributed to this report.